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ABSTRACT

A verbal clash at an international seminar between Harold Rosen of the United Kingdom, who for years had called for broader views of cultural literacy, and Robert Pattison of the United States, who also had called for a similar broadening of the definition of literacy, illustrates how perceptions of a shared ideology can be surprisingly incompatible, even between scholars from countries sharing a common heritage. Literacy problems of different countries, emerging as they have from different cultural and political histories, require different proposed solutions--different not only from country to country, but different within each country, according to changes in political agendas. In the case of Rosen and Pattison, the former's perceptions were based on the lived-through reality of a working class Jewish boy from London's East End slum tenements, while Pattison's notions were academic in nature and derived from an Ivy League east coast American WASP background. Each viewpoint was also subtly affected by the different political histories of both countries, which resulted in cultural cycles of dependency for the one and independence for the other. The need for multiple literacies and multiple approaches is further illustrated by differences of class, race, and gender consciousness between England and Canada. In all three countries the looked-for quality of access to literacy is not manifested in the goals and intentions expressed in rhetoric, but in the reality of the institutions where scholars work and conduct their business transactions. (KEH)

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CULTURAL LITERACY SHOCK: A DRAMA IN THREE ACTS

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Cultural Literacy Shock: A Drama in Three Acts

Thesis: Experiences with other cultures influence how you look at and what you see in your own.

First shock (not first in time but first because it epitomizes the tensions and confrontations involved in coming to terms with my own culture in relation to what I was learning of other cultures)

Time: November, 1984

Place: East Lansing, Michigan, scene of the first Seminar of the International Federation of Teachers of English, a relatively small gathering of 125 invited guests respresenting the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA, plus 25 invited upon application, from the miscellany of academe, of which I am one. The third of nine keynote addresses is about to be given, with Robert Pattison of the USA at the rostrum, and Harold Rosen of the UK in the reactor's seat. Pattison has just finished 1/3 of his address, entitled "Literacy: Confessions of a Heretic", when he turns to Rosen with the invitation to react to his ideas. As the pause stretches to an uncomfortable five, six, seven seconds, a perceptible tension engulfs the audience. Rosen begins to

speak, scathingly denouncing Pattison's ideas in words imprinted indelibly on my mind: "I don't know why I am on this platform today. I am so antipathetic to everything you are saying that I scarcely know where to begin. But, since you invited me to respond...."

The audience was aghast; the harmonious unity of the conference almost irreparably smashed over ideology -- ideology which on the surface seemed generally compatible: Rosen for years has called for broader definitions and views of literacy, definitions which situate multiple literacies within historical, social, and cultural contexts; Pattison was calling for a similar broadening of our definition of literacy. In fact, shortly before being subjected to Rosen's tirade, he had uttered the following: Literacy must be "something different from mere reading and writing. Specifically, literacy must have to do with our ability to use language in our negotiations with the world....Literacy describes a relation between ourselves as language users and the world we inhabit"(Tchudi, 42). Surely, one would think, such a view of literacy would cross the international boundaries between the US and the UK with relative impunity, especially within the specialized culture of an international conference of scholars, at which the norm for disagreement is usually rigorous but polite debate.

What caused Harold Rosen, urbane, sophisticated scholar of

international reputation, to break with scholarly etiquette at such seemingly slight provocation? What caused Louise Rosenblatt, soon after, to jump to her feet, shake her finger most schoolmarmishly at Pattison, and utter so memorably, "Young man, you have overwhelmingly misjudged your audience."

A possible answer: different cultural agendas for literacy, emerging from very different social and cultural histories, histories which were a lived-through reality to Rosen, working class Jewish boy from London's East end slum tenements, but only an academic reality to the Ivy League East coast WASP, Pattison. The American form of Liberal humanism espoused by Pattison — which, in programs such as Head Start, for example, identifies those children "at risk", separates them in their pre-school years from the others "not at risk", and "gives" them, with all benevolence, what the liberal humanists have decided they need -- is anathema to someone like Rosen, who would prefer to work towards developing educational and political systems wherein "at risk' and "not at risk" designations would be superfluous.

This is not the forum for arguing the merit of each man's view. The point I want to make here is that the literacy problems of different countries, emerging as they have from different cultural and political histories, have evolved -- and may well require -- different proposed solutions -- different not only from country to country, but different within each country,

according to changes in political agendas, as the history of literacy in the US since Sputnik indicates so clearly. However, just as Paulo Friere's literacy enfranchisement of Brazilian peasants in a totalitarian regime can inform our attempts to educate our nation's burgeoning population of illiterates, so the successes and failures of each country's approaches to literacy can inform our attempts to achieve universal literacy. I offer the above two statements almost as literacy axioms, obvious to anyone involved in literacy education. However, at the time of this confrontation in East Lansing, this view of multiple literacies and multiple approaches to literacy was neither obvious nor axiomatic to me. I felt distressed, naturally, and, possibly less naturally, humbled at the passion of Rosen's denunciation of what had seemed a plausible approach to literacy, determined to find sense in what I had witnessed.

Time to backtrack.

I am Canadian, brought up in the WASP hegemony of the largest urban city on the Canadian prairies, my assumptions of cultural literacy and literacy acquisition largely unquestioned until one day, in 1980, when I heard Harold Rosen, at a CCTE conference in Vancouver, berating the Conservative policies which had shaped his educational experiences in England. In response to my naive question: "How can you berate the system which has so effectively educated you?" he challenged me with, "You don't judge a system

by its successes; you judge it by those it fails." Motivated to explore this idea further, I began to read about literacy education in Britain.

When, three years later, I left Canada to undertake doctoral studies at the University of London Institute of Education, I took with me a considerable overload of paradoxical cultural baggage - a set of expectations based on a combination of my recent readings of Douglas Barnes, James Britten, John Dixon, and Nancy Martin combined with my, as yet unquestioned, culturally-shaped valorization of the British monarchy, the British intellect, and British accents, and the media-shaped valorization of Thatcherite policies in the wake of the war over the Falklands. I'm sure you can already predict my culture shock when these expectations and assumptions confronted reality.

Second shock (which in time occurred first): Unlike the first shock I mentioned, which was sudden, dramatic, and relatively brief, this second "shock" was really a series of little jolts which maintained a constant assault on my fast retreating cultural equilibrium.

The first jolt catapulted me into an awareness of the pervasiveness of class. Introductions at Rosen's graduate seminar were, with few exceptions, phrased in terms of class. Typical of these remarks were comments such as "I'm from a working class

background and proud of it;" or "my research will involve language experiences of working class kids in London schools" or the distressing (on many levels), "those hoity-toity middle-class kids think they have problems. They should experience the real problems faced by working class kids." Soon after, Iain Cummings, president of LATE (London Association of Teachers of English), told me of his middle-class guilt all the time he was studying at Cambridge, and of his effort to assuage this guilt by working full time at a factory, as a menial laborer, for two years after he graduated.

One of the most obvious, though not infallible indicators of class is accent and dialect, as first Pygmalian and then My Fair Lady brought to popular attention. BBC English, RP (Received Pronunciation - echoes from sources on high in that word "received"), and Grammar School English were (and still are) the power dialects in the Conservative hegemony. Imagine my surprise when, upon expressing a fondness for this BBC English accent, I was warned by Rosen, my tutor at the Institute, not to make any attempt to adopt that particular accent, or he would refuse to tutor me. Interestingly, during my research, I met several teenage children of middle-class parents who spoke perfect BBC English, who deliberately learned and spoke with Cockney or other working class dialect, in verbal protest against the class distinctions associated with language. Similarly, I came to understand the cultural impetus behind the British-born

Rastifarians, blacks who celebrated their African heritage not only in distinctive speech, but also in dress, music, walk, and coiffure, refusing to give in to conformist pressures.

When I commented on these powerful expressions of class (and race) consciousness at a seminar, I was challenged about my awareness (or lack thereof) of class in Canada, actually accused of blindness at my insistance that Canadians rarely viewed issues in terms of class. I kept this accusation in mental storage, ready to unpack it and examine it when I returned to Winnipeg. More about that later.

You may have noticed that race crept into my discussion of class when I wrote of the Rastifarian dialect. My next jolt into political awareness involved this combination of class, race, and gender as all parts of one issue, rather than, as had been my perceived experience in Canada, three separate, albeit often related, issues. Although publications might foreground one or two, such as The Tidy House by Carolyn Steedman, a story of women's roles in the home written by three white working class girls in the third grade, rarely were seminars or conferences devoted solely to gender issues, or racial issues, or class issues. Their interrelatedness, and the political agenda which grew out of that interelatedness, were paramount in the conferences and sessions that I either attended or read about. This interrelatedness among class, race, and culture was evident

in all parts of my life in London, in my sessions at the Institute, in the throbbing bustle of London streets, and in the schools where I conducted my research.

The richly multicultural population of London was dramatically visible in the framing context of the school classroom, wherein, as the work of Tony Burgess has shown, there will often be up to twelve different cultures represented, and eight different mother tongues, among twenty or so students. A very pleasant jolt was to see the range of accommodation to this pluralistic student population. Prominantly displayed in the staffroom of many schools was a listing of not only all the religious holidays, but also dates and details of the religious rites, including fasts, cautioning teachers to look out for weakness or fatigue in youngsters whose religion required a night-long vigil, or a 24-48 hour fast. In elementary schools, where "Christmas" and "Easter" and other predominantly Christian rituals would normally be celebrated in art, story, song, and drama, several schools had recently begun to exchange these terms for Winter and Spring Festivals, and to draw upon the festivals and rituals of all the cultures and religions in the school. Books written in the students' mother tongues, if not available in print, would be hand-made by teacher's aides, sometimes translations of school stories, and sometimes reflecting the culture of the mother tongue. Unfortunately, this cultural diversity was not so evident beyond the fifth form, last year of

compulsory schooling. In the university-bound or further-education bound sixth form, where I conducted the bulk of my research, I saw predominantly white faces and heard prdominantly BBC English.

In this sixth form, I was jolted again. These students were so serious. And their teachers were so serious. In contrast to the interactive hands-on experiences and vibrantly rich discussions up to the fifth form (16 years), the sixth form was characterized by scholarly solemnity. The contrast between the energy and vitality of a fifth form CEE (basic Certificate of Education -- now disbanded in the newly imposed system of assessment) English class, working and playing with language in scriptmaking and storywriting, and a sixth form English class, wherein language was used primarily to analyze literary text, was astonishing. In the sixth form, university positions and future careers are at stake, dependent upon students' performance on the external "A" level examinations. In the US, approximately 40% of those who graduate from high school will attend university; in Canada, approximately 25%; in the UK, approximately 7%, not through lack of desire, but through intense competition for very few university places, which the Thatcher government refuses to increase. There is an insidious political agenda here, one which is merely delaying the old 11+ separation of students (read classes and races) into middle class grammar schools and working class technical schools, abolished 25 years ago, to a separation

at ages 16-18 into either universities for the elite 7%, or colleges of further education or (un)employment for the rest.

Becoming aware of this intense government involvement in educational matters was another major jolt. During my three years in London, the Conservative Minister of Education dramatically intruded in the workings of the Inner London Education Authority, the University of London Institute of Education, and the multicultural London schools: the Inner London Education Authority, a powerful coterie of predomimantly left-wing teachers on the cutting edge of pedagogy related to multicultural language and learning, was disbanded; Harold Rosen, staunch anti-Conservative defender of the education rights of cultural minorities and working class kids, was given early retirement and his power as both Professor and Chair of the English Department divided between two successors; and support for mother tongue teachers' aides and other multicultural assistance was marginalized. Tensions between the Thatcher government and those on the forefront of educational research and theory mounted, as a unified national curriculum and a new system of assessment of all schoolchildren at ages 7, 11, 14, and 16 was proposed. Three years later, in 1989, these legislative propositions have now become legislated impositions.

Not all cultural jolts were so serious, though most have serious implications. References such as the Imperial Loot House for the

British Museum startled me to laughter, but suggestions from my colleagues that Prince Charles should have a vasectomy after Princess Di became pregnant with Prince Harry, because the population shouldn't have to support more royal leeches, were slightly alarming. The joke that one could tell your politics by the newpaper you read was not quite so funny when the story was told of a student who came to the Institute of Education for an interview for a Masters degree carrying a copy of The Standard rather than The Guardian. He was predicted at the sight of that newspaper, before the interview, to fail, and a year later, did. Nonetheless, I enjoyed watching people reading newspapers on the crowded tube, to see who read the racy tabloids, turning almost instantly to that infamous third page, who read the Conservative Observer, and who the left-wing Guardian. Most read the tabloids. What was truly fascinating, however, was the extent of reading that occurred in public transportation -- with paperbacks and even hard cover books as evident among the afternoon and evening travellers as newspapers were among the morning commuters.

The above stories are representative rather than exhaustive of my encounters with literacy in a different culture. Cumulatively, they encouraged me to look at my own culture with new eyes -- and I was astonsished at what I then saw that had always been there, and what I didn't ee that should have been there.

Back home in Canada, I relearned my culture. I saw as though for

the first time the struggles of teachers facing waves of immigrant children whose mother tongue was not English as well as increasing numbers of Native Canadian children whose mother tongue was an English derived from the grammars of their tribal tongues. While supervising student teachers over a six-week period in one inner-city school, I could see the efforts of teachers and principal to establish a child-centered whole language environment diminished by the school board's insistance upon a division-wide uniform assessment and reporting procedure, one which reduced the complexity of learning to letter grades and standard scores. I could see our educators trying in their classrooms to compensate for the historical estrangement of our native population from their culture and heritage, just as the teachers in England were struggling in their classrooms to compensate for the empire-building greed of their forbears. I could see the growing success of cultural minorities in their struggle for language rights, particularly in the burgeoning immersion schools and classes, not only in French, but in German, Chinese, and Ukrainian. Paradoxically, at the same time, I could also see the growth of an ugly phenomenon called "Stan Can," (Standard Canadian English), our colonial response to BBC or Standard English.

Since educational concerns are within provincial jurisdiction, we were free from powerful federal political control over curriculum and assessment. At the same time, while

the provincial Department of Education was encouraging pedagogy based on recent research into language and learning, it was simultaneously intensifying its program of regular standardized monitoring and assessing of language and mathematical skills.

It was not that I had not been aware of these trends before, but that I had perceived them as more or less benevolent differences of opinion, benevolent because, after all, the goals of all concerned were to increase literacy and cultural accommodation, and surely informed debate of all sides could only result in a better solution. That assumption had been the nub of my naivete, the reason that I could not at first understand Rosen's passionate denunciation of Pattison's Liberal humanist approach to solving problems of literacy. Exposure to British attempts to recover from centuries of their imperialist domination of other nations showed me that paternalistic intercession, however benevolently intended, maintains a separation which encourages dependancy rather than independency. It therefore sets up a cycle of dependency which can become almost inescapable. Literacy programs and pedagogy which reaffirm a dependent-independent hierarchy will only perpetuate this cycle, and are therefore doomed to failure. I finally came to understand that Rosen's anger had been directed at the vision of a perpetual cycle of dependence that Pattison's talk had unintentionally evoked.

This emergent understanding shaped the questions I now bring to my new country - America. The British Conservative-Labor educational oppositions are not so evident in your Republican-Democratic tensions; at the state level in Indiana, there is little difference, for example, between the Republican A+ program and the Democratic "Excel", despite the apparent name focus on grades in one and action in the other. I see here as I did in Canada and Britain massive dissonance between rhetoric and reality. The new philosophies foregrounding qualitative aspects of learning clash with the traditional emphasis on quantitative assessments of that learning. I look for equality of access to literacy not in the goals and intentions expressed in rhetoric, but in the reality of the institutions where I work and conduct my business transactions. I look at my students and I look at my colleagues -- and we all, or at least most of us, match. I walk through the malls, go to the bank, walk down the streets of downtown Indianapolis, and there I see the multitextured fabric of cultural and class diversity. I am no longer shocked, just dismayed that with all we know and celebrate of cultural diversity, we have not come further.

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